

What is architecture? concepts in the uk



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‘ We shape our buildings, and afterwards they shape us’[1]

Architecture, like history, is unreliable, subjective, selective, rewritten, continues to be influenced by rich or powerful individuals or institutions, and is rarely a reflection of the common man. The vernacular aesthetic of a country has been carefully curated and developed over many years, to the point where it is no longer a true reflection of the common people. Much like national costume, country dancing or folk music, architecture is too often used to preserve the memory of a golden past.

Architecture is an ideal.. It can and should evolve with the passing of time to reflect new challenges, aspirations and values. Modern western society has never been more egalitarian or democratic and its built environment caters to its inhabitants in all aspects of their existence: it’s where they live, work and play. As such the role of modern architecture is to benefit ordinary people while at the same time integrating the echoes of the past.

Architecture has, and will, always be used as a symbol of power and wealth or promote ideologies. From the Roman Empire to the New York skyline, the intention of the enduring architecture of the past is to celebrate the triumph of the small class of ruling elite, despite masquerading as a cultural space, where political projects attempt to become socially meaningful.[2]Today, the majority of European national governments have an architectural policy designed to benefit their populations, and promote their unique national image or ‘ brand’ abroad. This essay is intended as a limited examination of England as an example of how such a policy can reconcile the desire to preserve our heritage without hindering progress.

Architecture as representation of national identity.

In 2009 Denmark launched its first national architecture policy, 'A Nation of Architecture' with the intent of ensuring the production of high quality architecture, thereby guaranteeing a good quality of life and economic growth.[3] This policy was specifically introduced to promote the values that Danish architecture seeks to represent.[4] In 2013 Scotland introduced its own architecture policy, 'Creating Places', seeking to champion quality design which reflects Scotland as a modern, forward-thinking nation[5]

England remains one of the only countries in the European Union without any sort of policy[6]. Earlier this year Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries, invited Terry Farrell to conduct one of the most extensive investigations into the UK's built environment.[7] Both Ed Vaizey and Terry Farrell have been outspoken about the importance of the built environment to the nation as a whole, yet a Built Environment was not a theme covered by the terms of reference for the Review[8] and even before the review had been published, Vaizey publicly stated, "I haven't anticipated that the report will result in any changes to legislation." [9]

Architecture in the UK

The Farrell Review

The Farrell review is an analysis of the current built environment of Britain. It recognises that Britain has always played a significant role in architectural innovation, and that in general the standard of architectural design has improved.[10] However, this does not mean that current standards are

sufficient; English architectural design has stalled and is facing new challenges. The review highlights areas which are in need of improvement over the coming years.[11]

An Architecture Policy for 21st Century England

In the 1970s, England moved away from its industrial past, and previous regional manufacturing powerhouses, such as Birmingham, Newcastle and Manchester were eclipsed by London's stranglehold on the financial market.

[12]In 21st century England there is once again a demand for change and a shift in emphasis from the capital to the regions.[13]RIBA argues that a Minister for the Built Environment should be appointed to sit within the Cabinet Office “ promoting quality in the built environment and implementing a Design Policy across government.”[14]While ‘ core’ departments such as the Treasury, Foreign Office and Home Office have continuity from government to government, architecture, housing, infrastructure, transport and planning are liable to be lumped in with any number of other ‘ minor’ ministries.[15]Currently, architecture is a subset of Heritage within the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS).[16]

The consequence of this constant shifting around is a haphazard and disjointed system that surely indicates the dismissive attitude of central government to the role of the built environment. This lack of focus must be rectified. Nor is there any existing government appointed (or other official) representative to champion the cause of design[17]Farrell recommends that the current Design Review should be reinvented under the acronym PLACE – Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Conservation and Engineering.[18]All

government departments and government-funded bodies would then sign up to an agreed set of principles and a design policy statement, which would set out how they intend to co-ordinate the design quality of their respective built environment ambitions, activities and responsibilities.[19]Such a policy would also take account of “ procurement (of services and products), accessibility, sustainability, information and communications technology, maintenance and stewardship and the public realm”.[20]This more cohesive approach lends itself not only to greater efficiency and economy, but also represent a ‘ kitemark’ of uniquely English architectural design, rather than simply current British standards of constructions.

Perceptions of English Architecture

Scotland and Denmark are confident that their particular national identities are reflected in the values they intend their architecture to convey. If such a policy were to exist in England what would its identity be based upon? As the central, dominant nation in Great Britain for more than 300 years[21], and founder of the British Empire[22], the English have not needed in the past to worry about a specifically English national identity: the seat of government has always been in London, the common language has always been English and the established religion has been the Church of England. England equated to Britain. However the recent vote on Scottish independence was a sharp reminder that nothing is set in stone. The Empire, maritime and manufacturing supremacy have all gone, and now there is a need to rediscover an identity that is uniquely English and not simply a rehash of British clichés.

The danger is that a policy based on national identity might get hijacked by jingoists, sentimentalists and traditionalists. In a speech on St. George's day, 1993, John Major attempted to dispel public fears of joining the European Union, by claiming that Britain would always remain,

"...distinctive and in Europe. Fifty years from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and – as George Orwell said – old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist . . ."[23]

What he was describing was middle-class, conservative, Home Counties England, which has always resisted change and modernity. This nostalgic and rural English idyll is not a true reflection of English national identity and is precisely what has to be avoided if a national Architectural policy is to be truly beneficial to the English nation. The defenders of chocolate box England side-line the impact of the industrial revolution, which funded the manor houses and mansions, and the civic buildings so dear to the hearts of conservationists, ignore the slum clearances done in the name of social justice in post-war urban planning, and hold in check building work of national importance that would benefit the vast majority of the population, in order to protect the privileged few[24]. Such attitudes in no way reflect English national character traits of ' pragmatism, puritanism and utilitarianism that are aligned with (rather than hostile to) urbanism and economic growth'.[25]

There is a real disparity between what is promoted and protected as ' English' architecture by these privileged classes, and what ordinary people

need. Introducing an architectural policy to England would not only ensure some kind of minimum design standard, but could also stamp inclusivity, innovation and individualism as the watchwords of modern English values.

“ The distinction between historical and recent is redundant. All that is past is our history. That which is most ancient is likely to be valued more highly because of its rarity.... Our recent history may prove to be enormously important to future generations so we should attempt at least to anticipate this.” Steven Bee[26]

England drastically needs to change its attitude to architecture and identity and recognise that a national identity is about the present and should not just be based on the past. Its irrefutable reputation for preservation and conservation is a relatively recent phenomenon: 75 years ago there were no listed buildings, whereas today there are over 375, 000.[27]However, these are primarily buildings which are sometimes referred to as “ poster British heritage” fiercely defended by certain clique of British society whose tastes are selective and blinkered.[28]Only 0. 5% of all listed buildings are modern, built after 1945.[29]The architecture of the industrial Revolution (much of it based in the Midlands and the North) are less prized than the Georgian mansions of the south-east. This is not a rejection of the past: there is an undeniable relationship between heritage, place and identity.[30]However, the past is only an aspect of who we are. Individuals have dreams and ambitions, and in the same way places should be aspirational.

Even HRH Prince Charles who recently released his own recommendations intended to protect English design, insists that he is not against modern

design, and stresses that buildings must take peoples' needs into consideration.[31]

Rather than being run by a self-serving elite of upper and middle-class traditionalists, an effective policy should be carefully curated by a panel of experts who are in tune with the people and the nation's needs, able to judge without prejudice the best direction for a modern England on a world stage and willing to adapt and amend plans to reflect changing circumstances.

“(Britain) stands out ... as a country with an immensely strong and diverse cultural identity and memory expressed in its built and natural environment to which we all... can relate... It is those foundations of identity and memory that provide Britain with its successful future in a competitive and fast-changing world.” Alan Baxter[32]

Design for the Future

The term ' heritage' is extremely limiting, it is often only associated with the distant past.[33]

The current generation does not separate traditional and modern design as it was in the 20th Century, this current mindset recognises sees the potential in what is already there, the value of place, identity and sustainability.[34]

The approach is no longer to build to be remembered, but to build to benefit future generations. “‘ New' and ' old' need not compete.” Lucy Musgrave.
[35]

After publishing his review Farrell suggests that in fact England is a country which would not benefit from total, inclusive formal 'English' policy, and would actually benefit from regional policies which reflected our truly unique and diverse country. A policy that might work for central London could have very little relevance to a village in Wiltshire or a Northern industrial city. Such an all-inclusive formal policy is more effective on smaller countries, [36] a country like England has such a unique and vast range of regional identities that need to be protected, and perhaps England's long history and international presence means that it is not as easy for it to present a single, universal image. Farrell also calls for a Chief Architect, similar to a Chief Planner, which would mean a consistent high standard of design – our built environment must perform successfully, we must have enough homes for our population, we must tackle climate change, and even how can we design to deal with our changing environment, such as the floods which hit Britain every year.[37]

Conclusion

“ History is not defined by the ' discrete projects' (one-off buildings such as stately homes or castles) but is continuous.” Hank Dittmar[38]

If England is to have national identity as an aspect of national planning we must ensure that it is the best qualities that are in evidence. Whether the solution is a one size fits all approach as suggested by Prince Charles, or a more localised, regional policy, as proposed by Farrell, the aim should be to benefit the entire community by establishing standard values in architecture. That way ' good' builds are designed before they are erected as opposed to

identifying them as worthy or significant long after they have been built. A design policy offers a centralised goal for all those contributing to the built environment. It goes beyond just design, to a aim and ultimate goal to produce well designed quality building which fully benefit the inhabitants of England.

Regardless of whether a policy is for a whole country or a single village, it should be developed and enabled by government, but led independently by industry. The stewardship, long-term planning and identity of real places should be a fundamental part of built environment policies.[39] It is vital that if a policy is ever put in place it must be correctly implemented. Past RIBA President Sunand Prasad succinctly states, “ It is people that make the difference not policy. Crudely put, good people can work round bad policies but good policies cannot work round bad people.”[40]

Policy is not about creating a vernacular style, or trying to mimic the past, it is about ensuring quality design for buildings which properly benefit their users.

[1] Churchill, Winston. Never Give In! Winston Churchill's Greatest Speeches. United States: Sound Library, 2005, 298.

[2] Jones, Paul. The Sociology of Architecture. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011, 2.

[3]' 2007 Architectural Policy' (Danish Architecture Centre), accessed 20 December 2014, <http://www.dac.dk/en/dac-cities/architectural-policy/architectural-policy-2007>.

[4]Danish Ministry of Culture, A Nation of Architecture – Denmark – Settings for Life and Growth, May 2007, 4.

[5]The Scottish Government, Creating Places. A Policy Statement on Architecture and a Place for Scotland., 24 June 2013, 4-5.

[6]Farrell, Terry. ' Why the UK Does Not Need a Formal Architecture Policy'. The Guardian. The Guardian, March 31, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/31/uk-architecture-policy-review-built-environment>.

[7]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 31 March 2014, 2-3.

[8]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 147.

[9]Wainwright, Oliver. ' What Should the Government's Architecture Review Focus on? | Oliver Wainwright'. The Guardian. The Guardian, March 25, 2013.

[10]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 9

[11]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 8.

[12]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 31.

[13]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 31.

[14]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 148.

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[15]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 30.

[16]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 148.

[17]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 149.

[18]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 157.

[19]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 152.

[20]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 152.

[21]Krishan Kumar, Jeffrey C. Alexander (Contribution by), The Making of English National Identity, 227.

[22]Krishan Kumar, Jeffrey C. Alexander (Contribution by), The Making of English National Identity, 1st ed. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ix.

[23]Lawson, Mark. ' The Inter-Continental Address: An Analysis'. The Independent. Independent, April 27, 1993. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-intercontinental-address-an-analysis-1457731.html>.

[24]Peter Mandler, ' Against " Englishness": English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850-1940', Transactions of the Royal Historical Society7 (1 January 1997), 155.

[25]Peter Mandler, ' Against " Englishness": English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850-1940', 155.

[26]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 100.

[27]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 101.

[28]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 22.

[29]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 23.

[30]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 23.

[31]HRH Prince Charles, ' Facing up to the Future: Prince Charles on 21st Century Architecture', Architectural Review (Architectural Review, 20 December 2014), <http://www.architectural-review.com/essays/facing-up-to-the-future-prince-charles-on-21st-century-architecture/8674119.article?referrer=RSS>.

[32]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 102.

[33]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 104.

[34]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 108.

[35]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 101.

[36]Farrell, Terry. ' Why the UK Does Not Need a Formal Architecture Policy'. The Guardian. The Guardian, March 31, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/31/uk-architecture-policy-review-built-environment>.

[37]Farrell, Terry. ' Why the UK Does Not Need a Formal Architecture Policy'.

[38]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 101.

[39]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 150.

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[40]Terry Farrell, ' The Farrell Review', 149.